



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing
Freedom of Religion in Afghanistan: One Year Since the Taliban Takeover

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Nury Turkel, USCIRF Chair

Good morning and welcome to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing on *Religious Freedom in Afghanistan: One Year Since the Taliban Takeover*. Thank you to our distinguished witnesses for joining us and offering your expertise today.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy

recommendations to the U.S. government. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing.

Today's hearing will delve into the status of religious freedom in Afghanistan under the Taliban's de facto rule. We hope to better understand the current situation and consider how U.S. policy toward the Taliban can more effectively integrate religious freedom concerns.

Last week, on August 15th, marked the one-year anniversary of the Taliban takeover and their de facto rule in Afghanistan. The Taliban's imposition of their narrow interpretation of Sunni Islam poses a grave threat to religious freedom and all Afghans who do not subscribe to that interpretation. The Taliban's harsh enforcement of its religious interpretation violates the freedom of religion or belief of religious minorities, women, members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) community, Afghans with differing interpretations of Islam, and Afghans who follow no religion. Despite continued promises to protect all ethnic and religious communities residing in Afghanistan, the Taliban de facto government has been unable to provide safety and security to religious minorities against attacks from Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K). While some religious minority communities face the threat of extinction, others struggle to practice their faith in hiding due to fear of reprisal. Despite promises of change and

inclusivity, the Taliban currently continue to rule Afghanistan in a similar manner to the way they ruled the country from 1996 to 2001.

Afghanistan's diverse religious and ethnic groups have been decimated. Religious minority communities indigenous to Afghanistan including the Hindu, Sikh, and Jewish communities have become nearly extinct, while others such as the Ahmadiyya Muslim, Baha'i, and Christian communities practice their faith in private due to fear of reprisal. The Taliban and ISIS-K consider Afghan Christians, Ahmadis, and Baha'is to be converts from Islam. Consequently, these religious minority communities must remain hidden since the Taliban's strict interpretation of Hanafi jurisprudence deems conversion from Islam to another religion as apostasy and punishable by death.

I would now like to give the floor over to USCIRF Vice Chair Abraham Cooper to talk more about our hearing today.